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POETRY OF GEORGE BOWERING: GREEN VOICE IN CANADIAN POETRY

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ABSTRACT

As ecological breakdown has become common phenomenon of the contemporary world, it is highly significant to redefine literature in terms of the ecological parameters. Such an approach may throw fresh light of green wisdom on human minds which are at present darkened by the concept of limitless physical progress at the expense of the Mother Nature. George Bowering, one of the strong voices of modern Canadian poetry, comes up with vital green messages and values. An ecocritical reading of his selected poems is attempted in this paper to bring out the green shades of Bowering's poetry.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Animism, Shamanism, Post colonialism, Postmodernism.

Introduction

The ecological concerns of Canada have been more or less the same as those of the rest of the world. Canada also has faced severe ecological crisis since the migration of the whites to the land. An ecocritical reading of George Bowering's poems would bring out the anti-ecological attitudes of the settlers, as his poetry becomes a critique of the colonial centrality, which distorted the ecological concord of Canada preserved by the natives. The colonial formula of exploitation has been strongly resisted by George Bowering in his search for an ecospace.

Canada had been a land of people who considered nature as part of their culture, till colonizers dictated new terms of man-nature relationship in terms of European convictions. The ethnic culture which existed in Canada upheld ecological insight as well as wisdom by respecting and acknowledging the mystery and power of nature. Nature was not a lifeless object for the natives, but a vibrant and lively subject. The native tribes shared common eco-spiritual visions such as animism and shamanism. Animism kept the "... belief that all nature possesses conscious life, and that animals, for instance, are connected with humans and must be propitiated" (New, *AHCL* 10). Shamanism also emphasized the close relationship between humans and nature. Many aboriginal myths feature animals, plants, and natural elements like sun, fire, water, sky and stars as prominent characters. The natives believed in natural forces and they never tried to exploit Mother Nature. Whatever they took from nature, they did so with reverence and prayer. The Micmac and Tahltan tales, for instance, reveal the ecological emphasis of the aboriginal culture.

Until the arrival of the Europeans, Canada was a land of interminable forests. Trees constituted the perfect setting for the natives to weave a life of ecological wisdom that was the stamp of Canadian life. The situation changed considerably by the end of the eighteenth century, with large-scale deforestation and industrialization initiated by the new occupants. The settlers drastically altered the landscapes of the new land.

The new occupants of the land dislodged the age-old patterns of ecological accommodation between the natives and nature. Human attitudes to land, animals, plants and trees had been rewritten according to the European paradigms which often proved to be separating nature from culture. The European immigrants started extensive constructions along with farming towards the end of the 19th century. They viewed life in the wilderness as an undesirable return to the “dark ages”. In fact, Canadian settlers considered nature as an enemy and a monster that challenged European modernity in Canada. Once the culture of hunting and gathering gave way to large-scale mechanized farming by the settlers, the environmental situation of Canada was considerably altered, which adversely affected its symbiotic life. The western European culture introduced by the whites tried to distance nature from culture.

Discussion

It is against this background that Bowering’s attitude to and observations on nature attain ecological validity as well as significance. Bowering has been a vibrant presence in the contemporary Canadian literary arena as a poet, critic, editor, theorist as well as novelist. Bowering’s poetic visions are influenced by the Black Mountain group of poets, viz., Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov. The literary movement was named so because of its association with Black Mountain College, North Carolina, during the early 1950s. Charles Olson, one of the major figures of the Black Mountain Group, advocates an open-ended form to liberate poetry from artificiality. Poetry for him is a high energy construct in which energy is transferred from the poet to the reader. He wants to take poetry back to the form of oral art banishing rhyme and metre, which are part of the written form. Sense and sound are given more prominence by Olson and he considers rhythm the life breath of the poet. Thus Olson views poetry as alive rather than as an inanimate bundle of words. Impressed and inspired by Charles Olson and other Black Mountain poets, Bowering, Frank Davey, Fred Wah, Lionel Kearns, Jamie Reid, and David Dawson formed a new study group of poetry and later initiated the publication of the literary magazine entitled *TISH*. The publication was an important landmark in the development of Canadian poetry from the postmodernist, romantic and ecological point of view. The *TISH* redefined poetry in terms of new paradigms liberating it from traditionalism and abstract intellectualism. Also, it attempted to give a postmodernist shift to Canadian poetry and thereby break its modernist perspectives. It brought poetry close to the romantic ideologies. The first issue of *TISH* was released from Vancouver in September 1961 and it continued to appear until 1969.

Three movements, viz. postmodernism, romanticism and transcendentalism seem to have modified the ecological thinking of George Bowering. His poems rank alongside those of Frank Davey, Jamie Reid, David Dawson, Daphne Marlatt and Fred Wah who championed early postmodernism and initiated the decentralization of Canadian poetry in the 1960s. It was the postmodernists, in fact, who initiated the ecological thinking in twentieth-century Canadian literature. The postmodernists resisted the Canadian literary tendency to distance nature from culture. Himself a self-declared postmodernist, Bowering advocates freedom and spontaneity in writing. Along with other Canadian postmodernists, Bowering tried to “unwrite” modernist writings for their conservative, elitist and anti-romantic attitudes. He wanted to liberate poetry from the “mind-forged garrison” (AWW 72).

The ecological thinking of Bowering is directly related to the elements of anti-fundamentalism, anti-exploitation and anti-marginalization in postmodernism. Moreover, postmodernism agrees with the eco-critical rejection of dualistic categorizations. Both the theories make critiques of the Enlightenment philosophy that has led to the anthropocentric ideas of unlimited progress based on scientific rationality. The postmodernist standing of Bowering is ecologically significant as his green sensibilities are modified mainly by his postmodernist attitudes along with his romantic perspectives. Postmodernism in Canada, thus, has contributed largely to the evolution of eco-consciousness in Canadian literature as writers involved in the postmodernist movement “. . . have shown faith in the ability of the universe to direct composition through open, random, or multiphase forms, or a belief that the ‘craft’ of writing involves a listening to ‘Mother Nature’” (Davey 111). Whereas Canadian modernists tried to keep nature away from their writings, a lively representation of nature is seen in postmodernist writings. The postmodernists have taken the effort to bring back romantic elements to their writings and thereby move against the modernist perception of controlled

expression of imagination. In accordance with their romantic sensibilities, the Canadian postmodernists hold the view that the imagination is a force of nature that operates best when it is freed from unnatural restraints.

It is possible to assume that the green visions of Bowering are molded and modified, to a great extent, by American Transcendentalism and English Romanticism. The contribution of both the movements to the development of literary ecology is substantial. Bowering has tried to retain the spiritual as well as romantic tradition of poets like Whitman, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Blake etc. John Harris's comment is a pointer to the Romantic slant of George Bowering:

It is evident that, like Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Arnold, Whitman, Yeats, Stevens, and Cummings, Bowering sees the poet as a human being operating at the upper limits of human ability, and the poem as a process that enables the reader to participate in the ecstasy of its original creating. (114-15)

The following lines of Bowering echo Wordsworth's views in the "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (WPW):

We will die
before we grow up, the breath
releas't from us divine. That
is learning, the viewless wings
of poesy over the sea
that is the sky we will all
swim in, our extended arms
like wings, our hands raised
now by the element we were
born in. (IF 38-47)

The barrier between animate and inanimate things disappears in the ecologically modified Canadian poems. Bowering's poetry is, as the poet himself says, a romantic and real representation of environment. George Bowering has often declared his staunch faith in nature. He said in 1971:

I might be considered a romantic poet in that I believe nature to be the best instructor. . . . The desire to affirm a love for nature leads me to write of the forest and the river, of course, but it also leads me to seek ways to compose my poems according to what I can learn of my own natural composition . . . The poems work, therefore, when the acting faculty called the is not ruler over the others . . . but a participant with them in the acts of perception and the recording of those acts. (qtd in Harris 115)

Bowering does not consider postmodernism a revolutionary concept deviating from romanticism. Rather, he thinks postmodernism as an extension of the original Romantic perspectives.

In his poetry, Bowering treats nature-human relationship in accordance with ecological parameters. Despite his settler lineage, Bowering adopts a distinct stance on nature in contrast with the colonial culture. Cutting across the spatio-temporal as well as cultural constraints, Bowering senses an ecological space where nature/culture binarism dissolves into "bioharmonious" wholeness. His illustration of poetic form in *Imaginary Hands* clarifies his ecological standpoint:

It is pretty clear that a writer's poetic form bears a direct relationship to his attitude toward nature and his place in nature. Simply: if he regards himself as the center of his environment, he will write poems that show the master's control over his materials . . . Sometimes, particularly in the principal magazines operated by the enduring New Critics, the poem is a test and a display of intellectual and scholarly resources—of the poet and of the reader. The ability to control emotions, images, rhythms and so on becomes the test of a poet's form. Imitation of nature is forbidden; control of nature is insinuated. (142)

Bowering seems to delineate poetic form in relation to ecological dimensions. He thinks that a poet becomes respectable as well as charming if he imitates nature. There is no reason for the poet's impulse for control as for discovery. Man can never place nature under his control as it is beset with uncertainties. It is his egocentrism that makes man assume that he has mastered nature. Following this perspective of poetic

form, Bowering makes his poems self-reflexive and (re)presents nature is (re)presented by him not as a master but as a perceiver who merges himself in it. Thus, Bowering's approach to nature is in direct contrast to the settlers' attitude of seeing nature as an enemy.

Natural images make a vibrant presence in Bowering's poetic creations. Nature is not an inanimate object causing impediments in his way, but an inseparable part of his poetic being. His ecological visions can be traced back to the pre-modern ecological wisdom of the natives. Bowering's poetry collections, *Kerrisdale Elegies* and *Allophanes*, manifest intense ecological visions. In the present age of unbridled technological development, Bowering understands the pathetic plight of Mother Earth:

But remember nature?
She takes back all
worn-out lovers, . . .
nature is an exhausted mum,
she can go on forever,
this is late
in the machine age. (Elegy One 79-81, 84-7)

In *Allophanes*, Bowering sarcastically comments on the population explosion that has been doing irreparable damage to nature for centuries:

The numbing explosion of human population
in the past decade has drawn God away from
each man's need. How would the devils find
the time to struggle over every soul? (XV 16-19)

Here, Bowering depicts earth as a tolerant Mother bearing all kinds of torture inflicted upon her by the mechanistic age. For the poet, nature sometimes appears both as a beautiful ball girl in the baseball ground and as a divine helping hand in the game. Bowering's vision of nature as a palpable reality of the divine, which is in contrast with the settlers' treatment of nature as a monster, finds expression in the following lines:

She is not baseball at all,
but a harmless grace here,
a tiny joy
glimpsed one time each inning,
when she bends
and, oh God give us extra innings,
picks up the ball.
We applaud, and nature
is good. (Elegy Five 11-9)

Plants, flowers and trees are living beings that get along with his poetic life. Quite contrary to the colonizers' approach to trees as inanimate objects creating obstacles in their march towards the European model of development, Bowering looks at them as live and active communicators:

. . . The trees
shake their leaves to say look,
we're alive. (Elegy Two 71-3)

He reciprocates nature's liveliness with warmth of feelings and he is seen addressing the raspberries thus:

Yes, I see you, backyard raspberries,
you've been there
all my life,
all thru my verse. (Elegy Six 1-4)

Bowering's poetic vision acknowledges the interconnectedness of the natural world. The union of the earth and the sky is evoked with excellent strokes of poetic images: "Every flower is an exploding star" (Elegy Six, 56).

Conclusion

When George Bowering questions the whites' attitude towards natives and nature of Canada, he locates the converging space of postmodernism, postcolonialism and ecologism. The postmodernist as well as postcolonial stance of Bowering, along with his insight on the concepts of land, place and space, justifies his credential as an eco-poet. George Bowering's works, replete with ecological tonalities and his attitude to nature, embody his intention to transcend the settlers' anthropocentric culture. The western European mind-set of viewing nature as an alien and a de-spiritualized object of human subjugation and commoditization is challenged by Bowering. In its place, he presents the symbiotic model of life of the indigene as a viable alternative.

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